

Paper Hearts by **pathvain aelien**

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Paper Hearts

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The entire middle school has gone insane.

That's Dustin's opinion, anyway. He'd almost prefer Demogorgons and Mind Flayers to this current atrocity. Actually, maybe he *would* prefer them. Demogorgons and Mind Flayers don't shower pink and red glitter everywhere. They just try to kill and/or possess you. That doesn't seem so bad, to be honest. At least everyone's in agreement when it comes to monsters. *No one actually likes them, or anything*, Dustin thinks, conveniently forgetting about Dart. This, however... *people are actually enjoying this*. And that's stranger than anything *else* that's happened in the past couple of years.

"Why are you making that face?"

Dustin meets Will's eyes, reverie broken. "What face?"

"*That* one."

"I don't have a mirror on hand right now, Byers. What face am I allegedly making?"

Will sighs and drips a French fry into a plastic cup of ketchup. "You're glowering."

"With rage," Lucas supplies helpfully.

"Also a little bit of disgust," Will finishes, holding his fry aloft and gesturing with it.

"Oh."

Will waits expectantly, but that's apparently all the answer he's going to get. He gives his friend another couple of seconds for good measure. "*Well?*"

Instead of answering verbally, Dustin just points. Will cranes his head to regard the wall, which is decorated with red and pink paper

hearts. Dustin jerks his thumb upwards toward the glittery streamers but Will doesn't have to look this time. He's already figured out where this is going.

"Ah," Will says, shoving another couple of fries into his mouth.

"That's it? That's all you can say? Seriously?"

Will shrugs and speaks around a mouthful of fries. The words come out a little garbled but Dustin and Lucas don't have any trouble understanding them. "It doesn't really bother me."

Dustin stares at him in disbelief. "Seriously? How does it not bother you?"

"We do it every freaking year, for one thing," Lucas interjects.

Dustin gazes around the cafeteria, still pointing upward aimlessly. Lucas and Will exchange a concerned look, because Dustin looks a little insane. His finger is still raised and indicating the ceiling. Lucas doesn't have to look, either. It's almost Valentine's Day, which means the entire school is decorated as if a Hallmark store exploded.

"I guess it is a little...tacky?" Lucas ventures, giving Will a sideways glance.

"A little tacky? There's fucking confetti everywhere."

"So what? It's almost Valentine's Day. "

"Is there a rule that says everything has to be glittery and pink on Valentine's Day?"

"Probably. I don't really know." *Or care*, Lucas's tone adds.

Dustin regards him sadly. "You actually like it, don't you?"

"I do not."

"Yes, you do. Because now you have *Max*."

Lucas reaches over and helps himself to some of Will's fries. Will

pushes the ketchup toward him and Lucas waves a fry in thanks before dipping it. "Maybe *you* only hate it because you don't have- OUCH!" Lucas nearly chokes on a fry as Will kicks him hard under the table. "Uh. I didn't mean it like *that*."

Dustin isn't even listening, for which Will is grateful. "It's just really stupid. Valentine's Day is a stupid holiday."

"Is it even a holiday?"

"I don't know. Probably. The entire world has to shut down just so we can eat a bunch of chocolate and shit." Dustin moodily taps his fingers on his can of soda.

"Dustin. You like chocolate."

"Shut up."

Will gives Lucas a baffled look, and Lucas shrugs. Dustin's never hated Valentine's Day before. He's never really expressed any strong emotion about it at all, one way or the other. Maybe Lucas is right. Tactless, but right.

"*I'll* send you a Valentine," Will tells him kindly, and Dustin rolls his eyes in disgust.

"You guys are hopeless. Mike will agree with me, you'll see."

Lucas and Will exchange an amused look. "Uh...we are talking about *Mike Wheeler*, right?"

"Mike's *always* hated Valentine's Day."

Will coughs something that sounds like "Eleven" and Dustin glowers again, because the cough makes a good point, actually. He doesn't get a chance to respond, because it's a little hard to talk about someone behind their back when that person is rapidly approaching. Mike and Max slide their trays onto the table. Max sets her backpack down on the floor next to her chair and Mike stacks a couple of books next to it before throwing his bulging backpack on top of the pile. Apparently he's carrying every fucking book he's ever owned. Dustin glances at the clock and sees that they'll have approximately ten

minutes to eat their lunch.

"Jesus. I told you that you shouldn't wait for the chicken basket."

"It's the only thing that tastes good on Fridays," Max says, shrugging. Dustin pokes his half-eaten burger. It's cold, but to be fair, it was probably cold about two hours ago when it was cooked. Or reheated, because there's a good chance it's actually yesterday's leftovers. He wouldn't put it past lunch lady Phyllis.

"Why are you making that face?" Mike asks him. Dustin sighs and rests his forehead in his hands briefly before meeting Mike's eyes. There's a serious, imploring expression in them that alarms him.

"Abort," Lucas hisses in his ear, but it's too late. Dustin's still gazing at him pleadingly.

"This whole Valentine's Day thing is pretty lame, right?"

Mike's eyes widen a little too innocently, Dustin notices. "Yeah, totally. Really lame."

"Completely," Max agrees, biting into her chicken, and Lucas wilts in his chair a little. Dustin shoots him a triumphant look before glancing back at Mike. Mike's tearing into his chicken as if he hasn't eaten in years. Dustin has a sneaking suspicion that he's not actually that hungry. He just wants to avoid the subject any further. Fair enough. He's happy to believe that Mike's on his side, even if he knows better. Valentine's Day was probably invented by saps like Mike. It would explain a lot. He sighs and casts his mind about for a change of topic.

"Did you bring it?"

"Oh! Yeah. Thanks." Mike leans over and extracts a book from the pile before handing it over. Carl Sagan's *The Cosmic Connection*. Dustin pats it lovingly before resting it on the table in front of him. He shoves the rest of his burger away from him. Maybe it will taste better when it's recycled on Monday.

"About damned time. That took you forever."

"You gave it to me last week! I don't really think a week and *forever*

are synonymous, Dustin."

Dustin opens his mouth to retort, but he's distracted by a couple of girls standing near their table. They're wearing little paper hearts on their shirts. They look a little like Hopper's badge, if Hopper's badge was made of construction paper. And was also revolting. He groans.

"Do you guys want to buy a paper heart and a rose? You get the heart now, write your message and the name, and we'll deliver them on Valentine's Day with a rose," one of them chirps happily. Dustin isn't sure which is most annoying, the peppy voice or the fact that she reels the speech off as if they haven't done the same damned thing every year since kindergarten.

"Do we look like we want some goddamned paper hearts?" Dustin growls, and the girls look offended. "And those hearts aren't even anatomically correct, anyway..." Dustin half-rises from his chair, settling into his professor mode easily.

Will hastily interrupts the tirade. "No! We're good. Thank you," he adds politely, glaring at Dustin pointedly. The girls are glaring at him, too. Dustin obediently sits back in his chair but sighs with exasperation. The taller girl flips her hair over her shoulder a final time before leaving them alone. Thankfully.

"You don't have to be rude," Will hisses, and Dustin's instantly contrite.

"I know. Sorry. It's just such a-

"Stupid holiday, we *know*. I think everyone in the cafeteria knows. "

"You're starting to sound like Hopper," Lucas informs him.

"He must be rubbing off on you," Max adds, and the entire table shares a collective shudder.

"Gross," Mike says around a mouthful of chicken.

"Let's just drop it. A couple of more days and it's over for another year," Dustin says, picking up *The Cosmic Connection*. He starts to shove it into his bag when a red paper heart slides out between pages

15 and 16. Dustin glances back at his friends but they haven't noticed anything amiss. He reaches over and snags it from the floor, glancing down at it and snorting in a mixture of amusement and disgust.

"Lovely," he mutters under his breath. Feeling the gazes of his friends, he straightens up and turns back to the table. He flutters the paper heart at them and Mike turns red. Although not as red as the heart, Dustin observes. He grins teasingly at his friend.

"I had no idea you felt that way about me, Michael. Thank you," he coos, and Mike curses and makes a grab for the heart. Dustin snatches it back but drops it. It flutters down to the table and they all regard it with interest. Lucas flattens a hand on it before Mike can pick it up. He leans over to read the message and almost gags.

"Jeeesus," he mumbles. He doesn't have the strength to do anything besides mumble. Not right now, anyway. He's almost numb with horror, because *this is it*. This is a new low. Maybe Dustin has a point about Valentine's Day. It's clearly an evil holiday, because it's already possessed his best friend.

"I'm actually blushing *for you* right now, Mike. Sympathy blushing," Max says. Lucas snickers.

"I didn't know that was a thing."

"It wasn't, until now."

Mike's face heats again because they're all staring at the heart-and him-with the same amount of interest and disgust as when they met the baby Dart. He grabs Lucas's hand and forcibly removes it from the heart before picking it up and shoving it carefully out of sight. Not out of mind, though. Unfortunately for all of them.

"What?" His voice is belligerent. Max begins to laugh helplessly. He glares at her and she shrugs innocently, still laughing. Dustin starts giggling, all animosity toward Valentine's Day at an end.

"Oh, Mike," he wheezes. "That's...fucking...horrible."

"It is not. I saw it on a Valentine's Day card at the store."

Will taps his fingers on the table, carefully avoiding eye contact with Mike. With any of his friends. "Why didn't you just *buy* that card, then?"

"It was more expensive," Mike mutters, and Dustin rolls his eyes.

"So you aren't just a sap, you're a cheapskate, too."

"Shut up."

"I think El deserves a nice, store-bought card, don't you?"

"Shut up, Dustin."

"They're only like, 75 cents or something."

"I'm saving my money."

"For what? Are you taking her on a *date*?"

"Shut up!"

"You are! You're blushing."

"I am not."

"Even your ears are blushing," Max adds.

"Both of you, shut the hell up. They are not!"

"No, she's right, they really are," Lucas says, leaning over and moving his hair away from his ears. Mike slaps his hand away.

"That's actually pretty impressive," Dustin tells him. Mike doesn't answer, not with words, anyway, but he runs a hand through his hair, messing it up and conveniently covering his ears again. The table breaks up into laughter and Mike glares at all of them. For the millionth time, he's convinced that they're all a bunch of assholes.

"Besides, she doesn't even know what Valentine's Day is, does she?" Lucas asks. He doesn't mean to be antagonistic, he's honestly curious.

"Sure she does." Dustin's tone is emphatic. Lucas raises his eyebrows.

"She does?"

"Well, you can't watch two minutes of TV without seeing a goddamned commercial for it, can you?"

"That's true."

"She's probably expecting a diamond bracelet or something," Dustin teases. "Is *that* what you're saving up for, Mike?"

Mike glares at him but ignores the jibe. "It's not...*that* bad, is it?" He asks them hesitantly. His friends exchange a look. Dustin leans forward over the table and rests his chin on his hand.

"Well. On a scale of one to ten-"

"Eleven," Lucas interrupts with a smirk.

"Right. Of course. On a scale of one to *eleven*, one being vomiting up baby Demogorgons-"

"Thanks a lot," Will says, throwing a fry at him.

"Sorry. And Eleven being, well, *Eleven*, I'd say it's about a three."

"Two and a half," Lucas says, raising his hand slightly, palm-up.

"That bad?"

The table is silent for a few seconds.

"Well. Maybe that was just the initial reaction. Due to the shock. Maybe we can think about it more impartially now. Let's see it again," Dustin says sincerely. Mike misses the twinkling of his eyes and hands over the heart again. Dustin nearly rips it in two because he grabs it so enthusiastically. His friends crowd around it. Mike glances imploringly at Will, who can usually be counted on to back him up when it comes to things like this. Will fidgets and avoids eye contact when Lucas helpfully reads the short message aloud, for the amusement of everyone save Mike.

"If I had a flower for every time I thought of you... I could walk through

my garden forever." Lucas reads in his most dramatic, thoughtful voice, staring deeply into Mike's eyes as he speaks. Max cracks up first and then Dustin knocks his soda over, snickering as he tries to avoid the ocean of coke. Even Will is heaving with silent giggles, and that's the final straw.

"*Assholes,*" Mike snarls, snatching the card back and thrusting it into his bag before stalking from the cafeteria.

"He didn't even finish his chicken," Dustin notes. "And he forgot his books." Dustin nudges the stack with this shoe. Lucas and Max are still laughing but Will looks suddenly grave. Dustin knows that look. It's not a good look. He shakes his head at him reprovably. "Will, that amusement you felt a few seconds ago? *Go with it. It was funny, admit it.*"

It was, kind of, but it's also clearly important to Mike. And he can't argue with the fact that Eleven will probably love it. Not that the guys *aren't* enjoying it. Will's fairly confident Eleven will enjoy it without actually *laughing* at it. And yeah, it's sentimental. But sappy and Mike (and Eleven) are kind of synonymous these days. Which is a good thing, considering what they've been through. Will sighs and feels a little (or a lot) guilty. Maybe they should have been more supportive. Will takes a deep breath and fixes his friends with an imposing stare. Or he tries to, anyway.

"Damn it. We lost him," Dustin grumbles, seeing the look of determination on his friend's face.

"Dustin. Who was the one who tried so hard to get Mike to ask her to the Snow Ball?"

Dustin doesn't answer; he helps himself to a piece of Mike's chicken and glances hopefully at the clock. *Shit.* There's still plenty of time for a lecture.

"Remember your cunning plan, Dustin? What happened to that?"

"What cunning plan?" Max asks.

"Don't ask," Lucas mutters.

"You were the one that kept pushing him to ask her. You didn't think that was lame, did you?"

"Point the first: the Snow Ball did not have glitter. Point the second: that was not an overly commercialized pseudo-holiday. Point the third: That was different. The Snow Ball was..." Dustin searches for the proper word. "Significant. Considering what happened that last night. So his schmaltziness got a pass that time."

Will concedes the point but not the match.

"Remember the fashion show, Dustin? That was lame, right? But who was the one insisting on that?"

"Eleven," Dustin mumbles, and Will pierces him with a glare. It's surprisingly intimidating coming from someone a lot tinier than himself. Maybe it's because it just looks alien on Will's face.

"What fashion show? What are you guys talking about?" Max asks, bewildered. They ignore her.

"Whatever. *You* went along with it, and talked the rest of us into it."

"That's true," Lucas adds.

"Shut up. You liked it."

"And the makeup! Remember the makeup? Who helped her get ready for the dance?"

"We did," Dustin says with a sigh.

"Yeah. We did. Because we are *supportive friends*."

"We are?"

"Yes, Dustin. We *are*."

"Can't we be supportive, while also thinking Mike is pathetic?"

"No. It's not about us, it's about them."

"Well, we did have to read it," Lucas pipes up. Will gives him a look

of such black rage that Lucas subsides, holding up his hands in surrender. Dustin's on his own.

"*Obviously*, Mike didn't intend for us to read it, and you know it."

"I feel like it's the duty of the best friend-*friends-to* step in when shit gets out of hand."

"Maybe," Will concedes, "but only if we actually think he's making an ass out of himself."

"But we do!"

"No, we don't. We should step in if *Eleven* will think he's making an ass out of himself. And she *won't*."

Dustin and Lucas look at each other glumly. Will waits for a rejoinder, but it isn't forthcoming. He nods approvingly because he's silenced Dustin, and that was most of the battle. He turns his attention to Lucas.

"And Lucas."

Startled, Lucas looks at him.

"Don't act like you don't have a paper heart in your backpack *right now*."

Lucas drops his gaze immediately and Dustin hoots with laughter. "You do?" Dustin and Max ask in unison.

Lucas nods irritably. "Okay, maybe I do, *shut up, Dustin*. But I didn't write anything about a garden or flowers or any shit like that on it."

"So you don't have a garden for me?" Max teases, and Lucas's mouth drops open in surprise.

"Uh. Well. If that's something you'd like," he starts, before Max cracks up again. Lucas glares around the table, saving the brunt of it for Will, who look satisfied.

"I rest my case," he says smugly, just as the bell rings.

Dustin and Lucas take turns throwing notes at the back of Mike's head in history class. Mike twitches each time a missile hits him but otherwise ignores them. It's a lot harder to ignore their voices, though, even when they're whispering.

"Mike!" Dustin hisses, tossing another note at him. He hasn't bothered to write anything on this one, since they're just piling up beneath Mike's chair. He guesses it no longer technically counts as a note, but what the hell. When he doesn't get a response, he looks to Will for help.

"Mike. They-we want to apologize," Will whispers, hiding his face behind his history book. Will flaps a hand at Lucas and Dustin.

"Sorry," Lucas mumbles on cue.

"What he said," Dustin adds. "We are so totally supportive now."

Mike snorts. It sounds like an encouraging snort to Dustin, so he reiterates. "We are! We couldn't *be* any more supportive, right, guys?"

The guys agree, and Mike finally consents to make eye contact. "So you *don't* think it's lame?" He asks under his breath. There's a long pause.

"Eleven will love it," Will answers tactfully, without having to actually answer the question.

"Well. *I'm* not going to lie to you. It *is* kind of lame..." Lucas trails off because everyone is glaring at him. Including their teacher, who has paused in the middle of her lecture. He gives her a wide smile and raises his history book enthusiastically. She resumes the lecture and he leans forward again. When he speaks again, it's in the careful, carrying whisper of a convict in the prison yard. "But I guess it's romantic." Lucas pauses after the word, digesting it a little and trying not to gag again. "I mean, *she'll* think it is. Whatever."

Mike looks slightly mollified, so Dustin drives the apology home with a joke. It's what he does best, at least in his opinion. "I'm only sad you don't have a garden of flowery thoughts for me, Michael. I guess I was just jealous." Mike rolls his eyes but grins at him. Dustin opens

his mouth but Will shakes his head warningly and Dustin decides to quit while he's ahead. He sits back in his chair, instead, satisfied.

Mike's glad the guys are behind him, but he has no intention of pushing his luck and asking them for any further advice. Besides, he needs an *expert* opinion, and that means a female opinion. The only problem is that he doesn't actually *know* that many girls. Eleven is out, because it's *about* her. Max won't work, either, because she's as bad as the guys. That only leaves three options, as far as he can tell, and none of them are stellar.

He goes with his first choice after school. She's his first choice because she's right there in the kitchen, feeding Holly.

"Hi, mom." He opens the fridge to look for a snack, and also to seem as casual as possible.

"Hi, sweetie. How was school?"

"Um. Fine."

Mike stares blankly into the fridge before grabbing something at random. "Um, mom?"

Karen dips a spoon into the strained peaches and tries to coax Holly into another bite before giving him her full attention.

"Uh. Well. You know, Valentine's Day is coming up..." Mike trails off, hoping she'll be hit with a brain-wave and will supply the rest for him. It seems to work, because she smiles at him tenderly.

"Oh, honey. You don't have to get me anything. Save your allowance for the arcade."

Mike gives her a look that's so perplexed she ends up returning it with one of her own.

"What?" He asks blankly.

"I thought..."

"I didn't mean *you*," Mike says, in a ruder tone than he intends. "I

mean...well. I didn't mean it like that, just, you know."

Karen tries not to laugh. "It's okay. So...?"

"Well. Um. Eleven," Mike starts, and blushes. Karen hides a smile. She's met Eleven several times, or more than several, considering she's over at the house at least once a week. She's a sweet girl. Strange, but that's to be expected, considering her history. Or the fictionalized version of that history, since Karen isn't actually aware of the full story.

"You want to do something nice for Eleven?" She prods gently, and Mike nods in relief. "That's really sweet. I think she'd like a card or a stuffed animal, don't you?"

Mike shrugs noncommittally. Yes, she would like a card or stuffed animal, but that's not the kind of advice he needs. He already has that covered, anyway. "No, I meant, like, a...date?" His mom stares at him, surprised.

"You mean, like at the arcade?"

"No," Mike says curtly. "A *real* date."

Karen's eyes are suddenly overbright and Mike groans inwardly. "A date? Aren't you a little young for a real date?"

"*Mom.*"

"You're only thirteen, Michael. You have plenty of time for real dates. There's no rush."

Mike leans against the fridge impatiently. "I know there's no rush, but it's something I want to do, okay?"

"Michael."

"*Mom.* How old were *you* when you had your first real date?"

Karen quirks a grin at him. "Thirteen," she answers grudgingly, and Mike raises his eyebrows at her triumphantly. She shakes her head. "Nancy did not go on dates when she was thirteen."

"No one *asked* her to."

"Michael!"

"What? It's the truth, she didn't get asked out until a couple of years ago."

Karen sighs and pulls him in for a hug. Mike groans aloud this time but acquiesces. "If this is about what happened last year..."

"It's not!" And it isn't. He just wants to go on a date. With Eleven. *Without* the guys and Max. Also without Hopper. He loves just hanging out with Eleven at his house or wherever they can talk Hopper into letting her go, but he also wants more. A normal date, in other words.

"You're just growing up so fast," Karen sighs tearfully, and Mike gives up in disgust. He's not going to get anything useful from her. She's about five seconds from pulling out his baby pictures and sighing over them. Mike pats her clumsily on the back and exists as quickly as he can.

Luckily, it's Friday, and Joyce is working the evening shift.

Mike slides a box of chocolates and a stuffed animal toward Joyce, who rings them up without actually looking at him. She reels off the total and doesn't glance up until Mike says hello.

"Oh! Mike. How are you?" She doesn't wait for a response as she looks at his purchases. She smiles at him knowingly. "Are these for Eleven?"

"Yeah," he answers, and takes a quick peek around. They're alone, which gives him a little courage. "Actually, I wanted to ask your advice."

"*My* advice?" Joyce looks strangely flattered.

"Yeah. About...um. Dates?" Mike feels a wave of irritation as *her* eyes suddenly look tearful, too. *Jesus*. What is wrong with everyone?

"You want to ask Eleven on a date?"

Mike refrains from a rude retort and nods instead. Jesus. Who *else* would he want to take on a date? Joyce's eyes get a little brighter, but at least she isn't moaning about how fast he's growing up or trying to talk him out of it. She actually looks happy. Joyce sees and understands his mulish expression and puts on her most serious face.

"What kind of advice did you need?"

"Well. Where's the best place to go on a date?"

Joyce laughs. "Well, that depends."

"On what?"

"On what you think she'd like to do."

Mike gives a tiny sigh and speaks with exaggerated patience. "I don't know, that's why I'm asking *you*."

"Well, how about a movie? That's a great first date."

"That isn't very romantic," Mike says automatically, and without even blushing. It's progress. Joyce hides a smile.

"Oh...I guess you're right. Huh." She thinks for a minute, while Mike waits patiently. "Wait. Have you talked to Hop about this? I don't think he's going to go for it. At all," she says, as gently as possible.

Mike shrugs. "I was kind of hoping maybe you could talk to him?"

"Feminine styles again?"

"Something like that."

"I'll see what I can do."

"Valentine's Day is just a stupid ploy of commercialism from companies like Hallmark," Jonathan says from behind him, and Joyce shushes him. Jonathan smiles at Mike to take the sting out of his words and gives Joyce her car keys.

"You sound like Dustin," Mike says.

"Dustin has a point. Seriously. Just hang out with her like you normally would. It won't be the end of the world, I promise."

"Nancy always loved Valentine's Day," Mike remarks to no one in particular, taking his bag from Joyce. Jonathan falls silent. Joyce and Mike exchange a grin before Mike makes a second attempt to gather useful information.

"So where should we go?"

"Mike, I've gotta be honest with you. I have no idea what kids are into these days. All I know is that Eleven would be happy to just see a movie with you."

Mike sighs again, because that only leaves his last resort. He was really, really hoping it wouldn't come to this. At least it wasn't a completely wasted trip, though, he thinks, looping his bag over his handlebars. He decides to get it over with as soon as he gets home, before he can talk himself out of it.

"Nancy." He says the name as unenthusiastically as possible.

Nancy glances up from her flashcards. "Yeah? I'm kind of in the middle of something."

Mike fidgets in the doorway and Nancy takes pity at the woebegone expression on his face. She straightens the flashcards and taps them into place on her desk, like she's about to deal a hand of poker from a deck of cards. She leans back in her chair and gives him her full attention. "Okay. Make it snappy."

"What's the best way to ask out a girl?"

Nancy smirks at him. "I don't know, Mike. I've never asked a girl out before."

Mike glares at her from the doorway before turning around. "Forget it!"

"No, wait, come back."

Mike grudgingly moves forward a couple of feet, still looking

mutinous. "Don't say a word about how much I'm growing up," he warns in a threatening voice. Nancy tucks her hair behind her ears and nods agreeably.

"Okay."

"And don't mention anything about Hopper."

"Got it."

"And don't give me that sappy look," Mike snaps, and Nancy carefully smooths her face until it's completely devoid of expression before laughing at him. She doesn't have a mirror in front of her, but she's pretty sure there may actually be a sappy expression on her face. She can't really help it, though. Mike and his girlfriend are adorable.

"Two out of three isn't so bad, is it?" Nancy asks, because he's scowling at her. Mike flops down onto her bed and covers his face with his hands.

"Don't be such a drama queen, Mike."

"Shut up."

"And get your shoes off my bed."

Mike obediently sticks his feet off the edge of the bed, without otherwise moving an inch.

"Do you want my help or not?"

"That depends on whether or not you're actually going to be helpful."

Nancy laughs again before speaking. She's brisk and all business now, for which Mike is grateful. "Fair enough. Okay, so asking her out is easy. Okay, look at me. You're Eleven, okay?"

Mike rolls over to stare at her. "Who are you?"

"I'm *you*, dumbass."

"Oh."

"Okay. Do you want romantic or casual?"

"Let's say...romantically casual?"

Nancy stares at him. "Is that a thing?"

"How should I know?"

"Good point. Anyway, you have to have a game plan in mind. So if you want to go to the movies-

"I don't."

"Just as an example, okay? If you want to go to the movies, you plan it out *before* you ask her. That's really important, because it shows you put thought into it. That you thought about *her*, okay? So you pick the movie-one that you think *she* will like, not *you*, and then you pick a day and a time. And make sure it's actually playing then, so you don't look like an ass."

Mike doesn't bother to argue, because he can see where she's going with this. You have to have a strategy. It's kind of like D&D, in a way. Although hopefully there won't be an imminent danger of monsters.

"So, when do you want to ask her out?"

"Well. I want it to be for Valentine's Day, but since that's a Tuesday, maybe tomorrow?"

Nancy gives him a severe look. "You have to give more than a day's notice, Mike," she says, speaking as if he's Holly's age. "Otherwise it's rude and presumptuous."

Mike doesn't really understand, because he doesn't think Eleven would mind doing anything tomorrow. But maybe it's different for dates? Since they'll be dressing up. Or something. Jesus. Dating is a lot more difficult than he expected. He consoles himself with the knowledge that Eleven won't know if he screws it up somehow. "Oh. But we always hang out on Saturdays, anyway."

"It's different when it's a date." Nancy delivers the words with a tone of finality, and it convinces Mike.

"Oh. Okay."

"So, how about *next* Saturday, then?"

"That's after Valentine's day, though!"

"Yeah, but you can give her a card or something on Tuesday, and then ask her out for the weekend. Is that okay?"

"I guess so." Mike speaks as if he's conferring Nancy a great favor, and she stifles a laugh.

"Okay. Here we go. Ready? Okay. Eleven." Nancy waits expectantly. Mike also waits expectantly. When Nancy doesn't continue, Mike raises his eyebrows and she waves her hand at him in her patented *hurry the hell up* gesture.

"What?"

"You're Eleven in this scenario."

"I know that."

"Well, *say something*."

"Eleven probably wouldn't," Mike answers honestly.

Nancy sighs, but doesn't argue. "Okay. *Eleven*."

"Mike?" Mike asks, rolling his eyes and feeling like an idiot. It's an indication of how much he likes Eleven, actually. He keeps seeking out these moments of idiocy. Willingly. Happily.

"I'd really like to take you out for Valentine's Day."

"Out where?"

"On a date," Nancy clarifies.

"What's a date?"

Nancy stops and rubs her temple. She's getting a headache. "She doesn't know what a date is?"

Mike shrugs. He's not positive, but he's fairly sure she actually does know what a date is. She's seen more than a few movies recently and she always studies everything-even commercials-with a total concentration that's almost unnerving. So she probably does know what a date is by now. And she'll know that they kind of already had one. At the Snow Ball.

"A date is when you go out and do something fun with someone you like."

"Like a friend?" Mike smiles a little, remembering their conversation in the cafeteria.

"Mike," Nancy snaps.

"What? You said I'm Eleven in this scenario."

Nancy ignores him. "Do you want to go to the movies with me this weekend?"

Mike opens his mouth to reply before rolling away from her again. "This is stupid," and his words are muffled by her pillow.

Nancy huffs. "It's *easy*. Just pick something to do, and ask her to do whatever the hell it is."

"But what should we do? And don't say a movie."

"Okay...dinner? She's never been in a restaurant, has she?"

Mike pauses before answering. She's been in a restaurant before, sort of. *Benny's*. But that's not really what Nancy means, and he knows it. Nancy's waiting for an answer so he shakes his head. "Wait. Do you even have enough money for dinner?"

"That depends. Where is this dinner?"

"Someplace nice."

"How nice?"

Nancy rolls her eyes. "Do you or do you not want a real date?"

"I *do*, but we don't exactly need a five-star restaurant, either." The idea of a couple of thirteen year olds in a stuffy restaurant is laughable even to Mike.

"I don't think Hawkins has any five-star restaurants, anyway."

"You know what I mean."

"Okay. So nicer than fast food, okay? But something that you'll actually be able to afford. *Maybe*. Depending on how much you've wasted at the arcade lately. Italian, because you know she likes it already. Angelo's? It's nice, not too expensive, and pretty quiet." It's Nancy's own favorite restaurant, the one they frequent whenever it's her birthday or she's made particularly good grades, but that's not the deciding factor for her. Nancy knows Eleven would prefer a quiet atmosphere. The quieter, the better, actually.

Mike thinks of his piggy bank, because Nancy's brought up a valid point. He opens his mouth and Nancy shakes her head briskly to forestall the inevitable question. "No. You cannot borrow money from me again."

"I guess I'll figure *something* out." But he's still giving her his sweetest, most innocent expression, so Nancy has a pretty good idea of what "something else" entails. Meaning that it isn't something else at all, but her own wallet. *Again*. She gives him a stern look and resolves not to fund this date, even if it's freaking endearing. She has to stay tough. Mike's credit is shot. He'll still owe her money after college. When Nancy fans out her flashcards again, Mike takes the hint and sits up. He looks at his sister for a few seconds without saying anything, until she raises her eyebrows.

"What?"

"Just, um. Thanks. And stuff."

"What's the stuff?" She teases.

"More thanks, I guess."

"Should we hug, or something?"

"Gross."

"Okay then," Nancy says, pleasantly enough, and they smile at each other. She waves her flashcards at him impatiently, and the unexpected moment of sibling bonding is over. Mike rolls his eyes but leaves without further comment. He makes a mental note to mention Angelo's to Jonathan, however.

Now that he has a game plan, he feels slightly more at ease. And it's not like he's really *worried* that she'll say no, or anything. Because he isn't. Not really. Not much. It's just that a first date seems like a big step, an important step, and he wants to get it right. And they haven't spent much time alone together since she's been back, so it's definitely going to be different. Good, but different. But he's not really nervous. Not at all. It's what he keeps telling himself as he checks his hair in the bathroom mirror for the fourth time, anyway. Eleven is on her way over.

The guys and Max will show up in an hour or so, which gives him plenty of time to ask without having an audience. An amused and slightly nauseated audience. When they aren't a bunch of assholes, his friends are actually pretty amazing, and he knows it. He also knows that he doesn't want them anywhere near his house until noon. He hasn't forgotten their interference with the whole Snow Ball thing yet.

Mike hastily runs a hand through his hair one last time before bounding down the stairs and past his mom, who is folding some clothes that look suspiciously new. He groans silently to himself. He hates it when she buys his clothes, because they're always horrible. But maybe they're for Nancy? He can hope, anyway.

"Michael. Try this on. You're growing so fast I can't keep up. I need to exchange it before five if it doesn't fit," she says, shaking a garish yellow sweater at him. Mike grimaces but keeps moving.

"Can't, mom. El's here."

"I didn't hear the door."

"She's downstairs," Mike says, heading for the basement stairs. Karen

stares bewilderedly at his retreating back before glancing at Ted.

"Did you hear anyone knock?"

"No, but maybe she's living here again," Ted says, settling into his chair with his sandwich and turning on the TV. Karen sighs and folds the sweater irritably.

"Hey!" Mike says as soon as he's downstairs, because Eleven is sitting on the couch. She smiles at him and stands up to hug him, but he doesn't notice. He falters to a stop in front of her-in front of *them*, actually, because the guys are here, too. The only one missing is Max.

He hugs Eleven a little absently, glaring over her shoulder at the guys. Will shrugs apologetically, but the others don't even notice anything amiss. "What are you guys doing here?" Mike asks, keeping his voice as even as possible.

"It's *Saturday*," Dustin says, putting his feet up on the coffee table.

"I know it's Saturday," Mike says, still trying to keep his voice modulated, but it's a little difficult since he's clenching his teeth.

"Well, why did you ask, then?"

"I said noon. It isn't noon, Dustin."

"Close enough," Dustin says, grinning at him toothily.

Before Mike can utter another word, Will touches Eleven on the arm. "Hey! I did a couple of new drawings; do you want to see them?" He takes a folder from his backpack and brandishes it in her direction. Eleven nods and Will walks toward the table, conveniently away from the couch. They sit down together and Mike mouths a thank you. Will gives him a circumspect smile. As soon as Eleven is occupied, Mike sits down next to the others and hisses at them both.

"Seriously? What are you guys doing here?"

They both stare at him, confused by the irritation in his voice. Lucas is regarding him as if he's turned into a Demogorgon in the last couple of minutes. "What are you talking about? Why are you

whispering?"

Mike tenses in frustration. He glances over at Will and Eleven, and sees that Eleven is already looking at him, worry written all over her face. He forces himself to relax and smiles. She watches him for another few seconds before turning back to Will.

"That's just really weird," Dustin comments, having observed their interaction.

"What else is new?" Lucas asks. "Anyway, what's wrong?"

"I was going to, you know..."

"No. I don't know."

"Oh!" Dustin cries.

"What?"

"He was going to ask her out."

"Ask her out? Like, to be his girlfriend?"

"No. Well, I don't know." Dustin leans around Lucas to ask Mike. "Is that what you were going to ask her? To be your girlfriend?" Lucas snorts and Dustin hits him lightly. "Shut up, Lucas. A party member requires our assistance. Don't you? Do you require our assistance?"

Mike leans his head back against the couch and closes his eyes. Takes a few deep breathes. He suddenly has a nightmarish vision of the future, say, 10 years from now. They're hanging out in someone's apartment or house or wherever people live when they're in their 20's and Dustin's doing this exact same goddamned thing. "Were you going to ask her to marry you, Mike? Do you want me to help? Here, I'll give her the ring for you, okay? You wouldn't do it right, anyway."

Mike shakes his head to dispel the inane thought, blushing a little. He decides he's going a little bit nuts, but it's not his fault. His friends are *assholes*. Thank God *they* can't read his mind. Or feelings. Or whatever. He sneaks a glance at Eleven but she's engrossed in the drawings and Will is animatedly pointing at one of them. Dustin

snaps a finger in front of his eyes, and Mike shoves his hand away. "No, I don't need your *assistance*, Dustin. And no, that's not what I was going to ask, either."

"Why not?"

"Why not? Why not? Seriously?"

"Calm down. It's a valid question."

"It's none of your business. I was going to ask her on a date."

"You still can!" Dustin exclaims, injured. Lucas hits him.

"We'll go and come back later, okay?" Lucas asks, sounding remarkably like Will for a second. Mike smiles at him gratefully.

"That's going to look pretty weird," Dustin tells them both honestly.

"Make something up!" Mike nearly screams, because Will is giving him an anxious look and he's clearly run out of ways to stall Eleven. Dustin heaves a huge sigh but stands up and grabs his backpack. Lucas follows suit, patting Mike once on the shoulder for encouragement.

"Will," he calls, and Will immediately abandons his drawings. And Eleven, who looks confused. "We're going to stand outside awkwardly for..." Dustin checks his watch. "Five minutes? Five minutes. In the cold. Care to join us?" Dustin gestures grandly toward the door and Will laughs.

"Why?" Eleven asks him, and Dustin gestures at Mike.

"Mike needs a little privacy right now. *Apparently*."

"Oh...okay." Eleven looks at Mike curiously but moves to follow the guys out the door. Lucas stops her.

"Not from you, from us." Mike rolls his eyes and Lucas shrugs impatiently. What *else* is he supposed to say? He pushes Dustin out of the way and closes the door behind them.

"I have a feeling we're going to be out here for a very long time," Dustin says mournfully. Lucas stamps his feet on the ground to keep them warm. It's fucking cold out here.

Eleven's looking at Mike cautiously, trying to read the expression on his face. He leans against the door but it's awkward just standing here and staring at each other, so he walks toward the couch, instead.

"You want to sit?"

Eleven sits next to him, still watching him with that guarded expression. He smiles at her reassuringly. "Nothing's wrong, I promise."

Eleven doesn't respond, not with words, she just looks at the closed door and then back at him.

"Yeah, I know. They're..." *Assholes*, he thinks, but says, "weird. They're just weird."

Eleven doesn't reply to this, either, probably because *he's* acting pretty goddamn weird, too. He sighs a little. "Um. They knew I wanted privacy because I wanted to ask you something."

The caution changes to curiosity. "Yes?"

Mike fidgets a little, tapping his fingers restlessly against his leg until she touches his hand with her own. Startled, he looks up and meets her eyes. They're watching him curiously but the expression in them is obvious. It's the look she always gives him, ever since the day they met, and the nervousness abruptly vanishes when he sees it. There's just no reason to be nervous.

"Eleven," he says, thinking of Nancy's advice and smiling a little.

Eleven looks at him seriously. "Mike?"

"Do you want to go out?"

Eleven glances at the door, because her friends have just gone out, but Lucas told her *not* to go out, too. Mike follows her gaze toward the closed door and quickly elaborates. "On a date. With me. For

Valentine's Day?"

She doesn't answer right away so he tries to explain. "Oh. Um. Valentine's Day is this holiday, well, sort of, anyway..." but she interrupts him quickly.

"I know what Valentine's Day is."

"Oh. You do?"

She nods. And she does. She's seen it on TV. A lot. *Every* commercial is about Valentine's Day now. And Joyce's store is full of decorations for it, too. Eleven saw them when she and Hopper went shopping last week.

"Okay. So...oh. *Date*. A date is, um, kind of like the Snow Ball..."

"I know what a date is, too." She smiles at him as she says it, because she understands exactly what he's asking.

"You do?"

"Yes. It's for *us*." She says the word like it's something special, a term that was invented just for them. And it is. Or it feels like it, anyway.

Mike smiles at her. "Well, yeah. If you want it to be, that is."

"I do."

"Oh. Okay. Good."

"*Cool*." She watches him expectantly.

"Cool," Mike answers immediately, and they both laugh. Her hand is still resting on his. He laces his fingers through hers and just holds her hand for a few seconds. It feels really good in his own, both because it's warm and also for what it means. She's alive. Right here with him. And she's not going anywhere. He can tell from her smile that she hears the thought in his mind. She holds his hand a little tighter.

"Where are we going?"

Oh. He's forgotten that part. "Dinner? In a restaurant. If you want. Italian food?" He doesn't exactly have the money for it, yet, but he will. He hopes. He can probably wheedle Nancy into letting him borrow some.

"Lasagna?"

"Yeah, they'll definitely have lasagna."

"Now?"

She looks so hopeful and eager that he laughs again, although maybe she's just hungry. He doesn't care, though, because she looks happy. She's looking at him like he's made *her* happy, and that's the best feeling in the world.

"Not now. Nancy said I had to give you advance warning."

"Oh." She doesn't question this, because Nancy knows a lot about dates. Nancy dates Jonathan all the time. "When?"

"Next Saturday?"

"Yes. Next Saturday. Will...will *they* be coming, too?" Eleven tilts her head toward the door, but she doesn't need to illustrate the question any further, because an impatient tapping is coming from the other side. Mike shudders and she giggles.

"Jesus, no. Friends definitely do not come on a date." He doesn't mention double-dating, because he has no trouble at all imagining Dustin attempting to join them by bringing Lucas as his date.

Good.

Mike laughs and she smiles at him until he has to drop his eyes because she's giving him that look again. It's stupid, even to him, but sometimes he has to look away. Sometimes it just overwhelms him, the fact that she's still here. With him. And how incredibly lucky he is to even know her. And even luckier to be the one on the *receiving end* of that look.

Mike?

He can hear-*feel*-the unasked question and he answers her without even thinking twice. It's something he's said before, but it's no less true now than it was then. Maybe it's even truer now, if such a thing is possible.

I'm just really glad you're here. That you're home.

Me, too.

Mike's exuberance lasts throughout the weekend and into the next week. He walks with an extra bounciness that makes Lucas and Dustin roll their eyes so frequently the action starts giving them headaches. He's even peppier than usual on Tuesday, because it's Valentine's Day. It doesn't matter to him that Eleven doesn't actually attend school with them. She may not be able to sit in class with them and get anything delivered today, but he's worked around that obstacle. He bought the paper heart from the student council girls and he's written his message on it and addressed it, just like they instructed. He just neglected to turn it back in. Instead, he bought his own rose and left it at Eleven's house before school. He doesn't think of it as the Hopper household like Dustin and Lucas do, because Hopper is just part of the scenery to him. Eleven lives there, therefore it's *Eleven's* home. Plain and simple. And she'll find it (or has already found it) because Hopper will bring it in when he leaves for work. Doubtless he'll grumble about it, but he'll do it anyway. And that's the reason Mike's walking around with a smile on his face, even though Dustin begs him to stop every few minutes.

Mike won't get any paper hearts of his own, but he doesn't give a shit, to be honest. This isn't like a couple of years ago, when they all hoped to get one (from a girl, that is, not from each other). They didn't even really care who they came from, as long as everyone else knew they'd received at least one.

It's different now.

He doesn't need anything from Eleven, besides what he already has. Which is everything. Why would he want anything else? And he doesn't care if anyone else knows, because *he* does. That's all that matters. And he knows something else. He doesn't deserve what he has, he's well aware of that, but he also has something that no one

else does. Something special.

Us.

Mike skims his English book as the student council members pass out the heart cards. He only glances up when Lucas gets a heart. Lucas turns around to grin at Max and Max shrugs, half-embarrassed. The embarrassment becomes complete when she gets a heart of her own. She rolls her eyes at him but she looks pleased nonetheless. Dustin gives them both a look that clearly indicates the depth of his disappointment with them.

Will receives four different hearts, and his astonishment grows with each delivery. Dustin purses his lips but doesn't say anything. He's feeling magnanimous. He figures that Will deserves a pass this year, too. He's giving himself a big mental pat on the back for his generosity when something dreadful slaps down onto his desk. He glances up in surprise to find someone glaring at him. It's Emily, the girl who was on the receiving end of his ire in the cafeteria. She glowers at him briefly before consulting her list again and moving on. Dustin stares at the heart on his desk. It's trimmed in lace and it's revolting. After a few seconds he prods it with his pencil as if it contains something potentially explosive.

"Who's that from?" Will asks innocently.

Dustin detaches the rose and flips the card over before snorting. "How mysterious," he intones affectedly, rolling his eyes. Will scratches his arm and avoids eye contact. Lucas and Mike are watching him curiously. He flips the card around so they can both read it. Mike drops his book. He needs both hands to stifle his laughter.

"From a *secret admirer*. How nice. I particularly like the fact that you've cut out letters from a magazine to avoid signing it, Byers."

Will turns a little pink but demurs. "I didn't send that."

"Sure you did. So I'd quit complaining about Valentine's Day. And thanks."

Will shrugs. "You can't *prove* that it was me." But he's grinning even as he protests.

Dustin looks over the card again, more thoroughly this time. "That's some very nice gluing. It looks like a ransom note, though. Are you trying to kidnap me?"

"If *you're* getting the note, how would I be kidnapping *you*?"

"I'd pay a handsome ransom for myself."

Will giggles. "Duly noted."

Emily slaps another heart down onto his desk and Dustin groans. "Again? How many of these did you send?" Dustin rips the rose off and tosses it onto Lucas's desk. Lucas cringes away from it.

Will holds up his hands in a conciliatory gesture. "Just the one. Those things cost 50 cents, you know."

"I'm touched." Dustin examines the latest heart. This one's written with an actual pen, but it's not handwriting that he's familiar with. He looks at his friends suspiciously but they look as surprised as he is. It's a little insulting, actually. When that doesn't yield any results, he takes careful inventory of every female in class and scrutinizes their expressions when they notice him staring. He looks strangely pleased. His complaints about Valentine's Day seem to have ceased for another year, anyway. Will can't help but notice that he's propped up his hearts against his textbook so he can gaze at them frequently. Will stifles a laugh.

Mike goes back to his book. The first class of the day on Valentine's Day is always more of a party than anything remotely educational. He'll put the book away when they pass out the cookies, but right now he's in the middle of a really awesome chapter. He's totally engrossed with his book when a lacy piece of construction paper suddenly obscures the page.

"Thanks," he says automatically, and Emily gives him a little nod. At least she isn't glaring at him, although she definitely doesn't look happy. Apparently they all suffer for being friends with Dustin. Mike

picks up the heart curiously and pulls the rose off. He looks at Will but Will shakes his head immediately. Mike tosses the rose to the side of his desk and turns over the card. The message is simple but mystifying.

Mike,

Happy Valentine's Day. See you Saturday.

Love, El

Mike stares at the card, beginning to smile. It's still true that he doesn't actually *need* it, but he's glad to have it, just the same. *More* than glad, actually, although it's perplexing. How had she known? And how did she actually manage to have it delivered? Mike looks up because he feels someone watching him. Dustin's ceased his scrutiny of their classmates. He's beaming at him.

"You're welcome." He tilts his chair back slightly, regarding Mike with a smirk.

"You?"

"Well, the credit *mostly* belongs to Eleven. I just informed her of our charming middle-school ritual when she asked for my advice." Dustin leans over to tap the message on the card. "I did instruct her not to write anything, like, gag-inducing."

"You did not."

"Okay, no, I didn't. But I considered it."

"But why? You *hate* Valentine's Day. You've only mentioned it a hundred times over the past week."

Dustin shrugs.

"A party member required assistance," Dustin says, as if that answers his question. Mike supposes it does, actually. Mike grins at him in thanks before propping the heart against his book, too. Now he can look at it whenever he wants to. It's a stupid card made out of construction paper, but it's also a physical reminder of something.

Something important. It's only a paper heart, but it's from Eleven. And she gave it to *him*, which makes it a hell of a lot more than a paper heart.

It's a reminder that he has the real one, too.